

# The Ob-Scene of the Total Work of Art: Frank Wedekind, Richard Strauss, and the Spectacle of Dance

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Although it is probably apocryphal, the etymology deriving *obscene* from the Latin *ob* and *scena* has proved to be enduring because it gets at something in the phenomenon itself. Thus derived, the “ob-scene” would be something opposed to the main event, or, as Svetlana Boym put it, “something played offstage with respect to the performance.”<sup>1</sup> Whatever else obscenity is, it is something that is visible when properly it shouldn’t be, something that shouldn’t hold our attention but does. If we watch a performance with our minds fastened on whatever the obscene object is, then we’re not watching the performance right. That doesn’t mean that the obscene should be hidden; it means that it shouldn’t *be*, even as hidden. No one sits in a serious theatrical performance hoping for a wardrobe malfunction. The very imagination

that would contemplate this possibility would strike us as obscene. If you know obscenity when you see it, that is at least in part because the obscene does not occur to you as viewable before it comes into view. In this respect, being obscene differs from being perverse, which means to avail yourself of something prohibited by the law of the father but perfectly in view *as prohibited*. In what follows, I will try to argue for ballet as an obscene object in post-Wagnerian drama, musical or otherwise. Although this claim is part of a larger argument, I will focus primarily on a failed collaboration between two post-Wagnerians, Richard Strauss and Frank Wedekind.

At first glance, it is not clear why ballet should figure into a discussion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Wagner did not write ballets, nor do we tend to associate his operas with either balletic interludes or an emphasis on dance during the dramatic action. If anything, ballet was a feature of those kinds of operas Wagner

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<sup>1</sup>Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 197.

professed to loathe and sought to leave behind. The exception—the Venusberg ballet in the 1861 Paris *Tannhäuser*—proves the rule. While Wagner's mature music dramas seem quite inimical to dance, his theoretical writings again and again return to dance, and in particular to ballet, as the *caput mortuum* which opera has to shed in order to become true music drama. Traditional opera, Wagner claims, owed its bad reputation to "the addition [*Zuthat*] of ballet and decorative pomp," which served to associate it with "the mere opulent entertainment of the courts" and thus considers it "entirely separate from ordinary people," and ultimately "a foreign [*ausländisch*] artistic genre."<sup>2</sup> In order to become an art form properly native to Germany, opera (or rather "music drama") has to jettison the supplement of "ballet and decorative pomp," "the machinery of the grand opera," as Wagner puts it in his famous review of Weber's *Der Freischütz*.<sup>3</sup>

That does not mean that Wagner regards dance, or even the ballet, as in and of themselves illegitimate or anti-German art forms. "The ballet is the entirely coequal brother of opera, departing from the same flawed foundation, which is why we like seeing them, as though to cover each the other's blind spots [*Blößen*], go hand in hand."<sup>4</sup> The Edenic imagery here is not accidental: Opera and ballet are both "fallen" forms from the truly unified work of art, and their modern combination is less a restitution of that totality than a mutual covering of one another's shame—Adam and Eve holding each other's fig leaf. Being fallen here means that opera and ballet each hypostatize a particular moment of the totality of the arts at the (often violent) expense of the other. In his essay "Reuniting the Three Human Arts," Wagner describes their relationship as something of a civil war: "The extent to which the arts of Dance and Poetry were made to be merely subservient to [Music], aroused . . . a defiant reaction against the domineering sister art."<sup>5</sup> It

is only logical, he concedes, that when given the chance, the dance-element in traditional opera will take over entirely, will "spread her legs [*schwingt sie die Beine*] across the stage and dance her sister, Music, off it into the orchestra, turning, swaying and whirling until the audience can no longer see the forest for the trees, that is the opera for the legs."<sup>6</sup>

Conversely, opera (that is, traditional opera) tends to crowd out the element of dance, tends to straightjacket its singers, to turn them into mere static mouthpieces for music and libretto. Music drama, Wagner thinks, brings all three elements into unison by sublimating the dance-element into the more ideal movement of drama. "The dance executed entirely according to its music, the ideal [*idealische*] form of dance, is in reality dramatic action. It is to primitive dance what the symphony is to primitive dance music."<sup>7</sup> As Daniel Albright put it: "Dance is one of the arts, but it is also all of the arts."<sup>8</sup> Dramatic action is the alembic that transmutes the awkward operatic interlude into that newer, purer alloy, musical drama: there, no art has to pause to give its sister art space, nor does one art abrogate its claim to the performance at any one point. Dance survives, but only in what Hegel would have called *sublation* (*Aufhebung*). Its animating rhythms endure, but its visible component, the legs that make us forget the forest for the trees, has become invisible. Even the one ballet scene of the mature Wagner, the Venusberg sequence inserted into *Tannhäuser*, tells a similar story. The ballet sequence ends with a song and a spoken declaration that free *Tannhäuser* from Venus's bodily spell. The arts come apart, and dance's grown-up cousin, the dramatic action, can begin. It's a move from pure, undiscursive bodiliness (not for nothing did Wagner play with the association of *Venusberg* and *mons Veneris*)<sup>9</sup> to a bodiliness mediated and negotiated by language.

Not seeing the opera for the legs: that seems

<sup>2</sup>Richard Wagner, "Über deutsches Musikwesen," *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1911), 1, 160 [henceforth: *SuD*].

<sup>3</sup>Richard Wagner, "Der Freischütz," *SuD*, 1, 215.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Wagner, "Zukunftsmusik," *SuD*, 7, 129.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Wagner, "Versuche zur Wiedervereinigung der drei menschlichen Kunstarten," *SuD* 3, 120.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Wagner, *SuD*, 3, 121.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Wagner, "Zukunftsmusik," *SuD*, 7, 129.

<sup>8</sup>Daniel Albright, *Panaesthetics: On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 282.

<sup>9</sup>Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, trans. Daphne Ellis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 121.

like a good starting definition of obscenity. What makes opera obscene is not the fact that legs are sexy. It's that their sexiness distorts what should by rights be a mixed medium. Music, text, staging, all of these aspects transmit meaning. Legs are just brute facts. Their allure also distracts opera from its mission of creating meaning by combining different but coeval art forms.

But let us leave aside the distracting legs for the moment, and turn to opera. Proper opera. Opera with no legs in the air. By the late 1890s Richard Strauss had reached a dead end as an opera composer. Impressed by the works of Wagner, he had undertaken an opera heavily indebted to the *Meister* of Bayreuth. That opera, 1894's *Guntram*, had been almost too diligent in aping Wagner; the scenario was a mix of *Parsifal* and *Tannhäuser*. Strauss had based his libretto on the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, to whom his friend, the rabid Wagnerian Alexander Ritter, had introduced him. And to top it all off, Strauss had dutifully served as his own librettist. *Guntram* was not received well, and Strauss decided to abstain from the opera stage for the time being. When he reemerged, his operas looked and sounded quite different. His operas, from *Feuersnot* on, were written in close collaboration with sundry luminaries of German literature; the medieval themes and heady metaphysics of *Guntram* had given way to other concerns.

In this process of self-reinvention, Strauss's path intersected with that of another artist struggling with Wagner's legacy, although perhaps less obviously so—the playwright Frank Wedekind. After his efforts in opera had hit a dead end, Strauss considered leaving the form behind altogether and thought about venturing into that most un-Wagnerian of territories, the ballet, where he could finally be rid of the ever-looming stickler from Bayreuth. At the composer's urging, Wedekind sent Strauss two ballet scenarios in February 1896, one entitled *The Fleas* (first drafted in French in 1892), the other probably a new text entitled *The Mos-*

*quito Prince*.<sup>10</sup> Strauss appears to have drafted some music for Wedekind's proposals, though it is not clear for which; a sketchbook covering musical drafts from 1899 to roughly 1911 is simply labeled "Ballet Wedekind [*sic*], etc."<sup>11</sup> Strauss was apparently serious enough about the idea to write music for the proposed collaboration, but not serious enough to learn how to spell his collaborator's name. Ultimately, mutual interest notwithstanding, the proposed collaboration came to naught.

If the two men's trajectories parted after this ephemeral entanglement, they each parted by diving head-first into the obscenity decried by Wagner: not seeing the opera for the legs. Strauss would adapt Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* to produce an opera in which the singing suddenly stops, in which the singer was (at the time) usually replaced by a ballet dancer, and in which *Salomé* beguiles no longer with the rhetoric of her voice, but with the far more persuasive rhetoric of her legs. Wedekind too managed to stage his ballet, although he relied on the powers of the novelist rather than those of a composer to do so. He bred his own dancers, subjecting them to a rigorous training all in the service of a project that had occupied him since the early 1890s. At the same time as he sent his ballet drafts to Strauss, Wedekind incorporated one of them, *The Mosquito Prince* (*Der Mückenprinz*) into his fragmentary novel *Mine-haha; or, On the Physical Education of Young Girls* (*Mine-haha oder Über die körperliche Erziehung der jungen Mädchen*, 1903).<sup>12</sup> In the event, Strauss's anguished attempts at putting some distance between his operas and Wagner's transmitted themselves to the writer. Both the composer

<sup>11</sup>Wayne Heisler Jr., *Ballet Collaborations of Richard Strauss* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 223.

<sup>12</sup>Wedekind initially wrote *Mine-haha* as part of a larger novel. Portions of it (minus the framing narrative and the final portion of the text) appeared in 1901 in the journal *Die Insel*. The title phrase Wedekind took from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem "The Song of Hiawatha," where Minne-haha is Hiawatha's lover. Her name thus functions for Wedekind as a cypher for a natural, unalienated sensuality. Why Wedekind decided to drop the second "n" in Minne-haha is not clear, although he may have wanted to avoid confusion with the German word *minne* (for medieval courtly love). At the same time, Wedekind self-applied the name as a playful pseudonym on some occasions.

<sup>10</sup>Willi Schuh, *Richard Strauss: A Chronicle of the Early Years, 1864–1898* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 437.

and the playwright used their most overtly obscene work to grapple with the legacy of the total work of art, of music drama, and of Wagner's looming shadow more generally.

#### THE STAGE AS HYMEN: *MINE-HAHA*

*Mine-Haha* presents itself as a found manuscript, presented and slightly edited by Wedekind himself (he claims to have added the subtitle). Upon the death of an elderly neighbor, Wedekind finds that she, having read his *Spring Awakening* and sensed a kindred spirit, has left in his care a manuscript, which he then edits and publishes. The manuscript purports to constitute her "life story," a claim immediately belied by the fact that the childhood narrated in the following four chapters clearly unfolds in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a time of subway trains and electrical lighting. Wedekind embeds his ballet drafts in a typical nineteenth-century framing narrative, but he deliberately lets the embedding show. Dance occurs in the context of a flamboyantly literary device, an image of self-sufficiency, but not itself sufficient: legs that require someone to explain the forest hidden behind its trees.

Those legs come to demarcate a childhood spent in perfect isolation from the world of subway trains and electrical lighting. The narrator of the "found" manuscript, identified as "Hidalla," grows up in an idyllic, remote family-like unit with children of both sexes under the tutelage of an older girl named Gertrud. Once they reach a certain age, the boys and girls disappear from the Edenic scene with little explanation. After a few years, Hidalla is whisked off to a new environment, a large enclosed park, populated only by groups of young girls living communally under the direction of older girls and attended to by a caste of grotesquely disfigured old women.

At night, when the young girls have fallen asleep, their older compatriots sneak off into a building from which the younger ones are barred. Hidalla soon learns that this is "the theater."<sup>13</sup> At some point Hidalla herself is

judged physically ready and is brought along. She performs night after night for an unseen audience brought in from the nearby city, first as an extra, then slowly graduating to more central roles. The piece being performed is none other than *The Mosquito Prince* (*Der Mückenprinz*), as written by a certain "Ademar" whom the narrator professes to have met in person later in life. The text provides a full theatrical précis of *The Mosquito Prince*, first listing the dramatis personae, then giving a short synopsis of the plot. This text is the very document that Wedekind wrote for Strauss. One day, her dance instructor Simba leads Hidalla and the other girls of a certain age out of the theater's front entrance and through a subway train into the city. At the terminus, they are matched with boys their own age and led, to the cheers of a crowd throwing flowers, to "the capitol." At this point the manuscript breaks off. The narrator indicates that she subsequently returned to the mysterious theater once more, this time as a spectator—a guest of a man named Fabian, "my friend and protector at the time."<sup>14</sup>

*Mine-haha* is a puzzling, confounding, and disturbing text. It is also somewhat unusual for this stage of Wedekind's career. To be sure, around the same time as he wrote *Mine-haha*, he wrote two plays, *Hidalla* and *Musik*, that are clearly connected to *Mine-haha* thematically (*Musik* in fact deals with an aspiring Wagnerian soprano's aborted pregnancy). But those are social dramas of a fairly moralistic bent, miles removed from *Mine-haha*'s dreamy amorism. And perhaps most importantly: *Hidalla* and *Musik* deploy sex in the service of some overarching goal. It's front and center, but it's there to expose the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality. In *Mine-haha*, sex and sexuality are a kind of ambient glow, and though they never take center stage, it's clear that the book is ultimately *about* them.

It is this ambience that accounts for *Mine-haha*'s pervasive whiff of obscenity, the way that sexuality governs all that happens in the park *without* there being a political idea, a critical impetus, or even an impulse to *épater le*

<sup>13</sup>Frank Wedekind, *Prosa: Erzählungen, Aufsätze, Selbstzeugnisse, Briefe* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1969), 343.

<sup>14</sup>Wedekind, *Prosa: Erzählungen, Aufsätze, Selbstzeugnisse, Briefe*, 122.

*bourgeois* to provide a point for it. Wedekind's own contemporaries were not sure how to understand this emphasis on sexuality for sexuality's sake: some, for instance, the later German president Theodor Heuss, simply imposed a meaning that was objectively lacking and decided that the story *had* to constitute a counterproposal to bourgeois sexual mores.<sup>15</sup> Julius Kapp, then a famous dramaturge and later a Wagner biographer, criticized the work as "shamelessness of the worst kind."<sup>16</sup> And none other than Leon Trotsky read the work as a rejection of bourgeois modes of education financed through exploitation: "Even when one accepts the system as a whole—up to and including the idea that the girls' education is paid for by their participation in Moulin-Rouge-pantomimes—even then one must come to the conclusion that Mine-haha represents only an education for the few."<sup>17</sup>

That obscenity nevertheless comes to a head in the ballet that Wedekind presents in exhausting detail within the text, and that, as noted earlier, he imports wholesale from the drafts he sent to Strauss. At the same time, what in the drafts was a self-contained story in itself is now a nested narrative, in fact a doubly nested narrative. What Wedekind and Strauss wanted to present to a theatergoing public becomes a fictional play in a fiction contextualized by another fiction. This double embedding marks the text as a reaction to the problems posed by Wagner. Wedekind's sly way of staging his ballets in fictive space insistently foregrounds the place of performance: first by insisting that the novel is some kind of educational tract; and second by providing an exhaustive description of the modes of spectacle and spectatorship engendered by the theatrical space in which the ballet drafts are performed. By enframing *Der Mückenprinz* in a narrative of *Erziehung* (education), albeit not of *Bildung*, and by enframing that narrative in Wedekind's

own biography, the author transforms the text and makes explicit just how the strange events recounted there sketch an ob-scene of the total work of art.

As its subtitle indicates, Wedekind's text moves from merely taking ballet as a medium of storytelling to considering dance and its staging as an institution, in particular an institution of *Erziehung* (education). In this he could consider himself in good company: the idea of liberating the body from societal norms through more "natural" forms of education was an important aspect of what we might term the *fin-de-siècle* counterculture in Germany.<sup>18</sup> The "life reform" movement, the *Wandervögel*, the Youth Movement, anthroposophism, nudism: all of these were seeking to impart to young people a more natural form of movement, and all of them turned to dance to do it.<sup>19</sup> *Mine-haha*'s subtitle (especially the telltale "On the") seems to mark it as a narrativized educational theory in the tradition of Rousseau's *Émile*.<sup>20</sup> It is debatable how seriously Wedekind wanted his readers to take this aspect of his text, although clearly many readers understood it that way; Trotsky, for instance, objected that the model set forth in the book was unworkable, since "there would be too much ballet in the land."<sup>21</sup> But even if offered semi-seriously, the framing of the book as a text about education clearly transforms the nature and aim of the draft Wedekind had sent to Strauss. Dance is no longer just dance in *Mine-haha*. Instead it functions as part of a highly idiosyncratic project of *Erziehung*: a project of formative drill rather than the directed growth of *Bildung*; a project aimed at drilling "young girls"; and a project of "education" aimed exclusively at the girls' bodily development.

The theater remains the centerpiece of *Mine-*

<sup>15</sup>Theodor Heuss, "Frank Wedekind," in *Vor der Bücherwand* (Tübingen: Wunderlich, 1961), 253–58, here 257.

<sup>16</sup>Julius Kapp, "Mine-Haha," in *Frank Wedekind: Seine Eigenart und seine Werke* (Berlin: Barsdorf, 1909), 36–41, here 39.

<sup>17</sup>Leo Trotzky, *Literatur und Revolution* (Berlin: Mehring, 1994), 436.

<sup>18</sup>Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>19</sup>Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup>On the role of Rousseau in Wedekind's works of the 1890s (especially *Spring Awakening*), see Peter Jelavich, *Munich and Theatrical Modernism: Politics, Playwriting, and Performance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 83.

<sup>21</sup>Trotzky, *Literatur und Revolution*, 436.

*Haha's* complex reflections on sex and aesthetics, but it is now one building in a park, one institution in a wider system. Wedekind's narrator spends as much time exploring the structure of the theater as he does narrating what goes on there. Whisked off to a mysterious "white house," Hidalla is ushered into a changing room, where "an old woman washed my feet."<sup>22</sup> The theater is connected to the "white house" via an underground passage and is also serviced by an electric subway train that brings in "the audience from the city each night."<sup>23</sup> The stage is brightly illuminated by "a large reflector" hanging from the middle of the roof, as well as by lamps "affixed under the lowest set of seats."

The seats rise "as though in an amphitheater." Each row is outfitted with bars on the front and kept pitch-dark, "so that we couldn't even make out whether [the seats] were occupied or not." Only when leaving the seclusion of the park does Hidalla get to see the rest of the structure. Dressed ironically as though they were theatergoers, the girls pass through the theater stage and enter a "door that none of us had ever noticed," which ushers them into the building's lobby. "To the right and to the left there were the ticket counters; we passed the wide spiral staircases; everything was illuminated by electrical lighting, and soon we were next to the cars, into which we crowded with ease."<sup>24</sup>

The series of passages and tubes that lead into the otherwise inaccessible theater are redolent with connotations of sex and birthing, with the theater as a kind of womb. What is more striking is that the womb is thoroughly mechanized. Even though the park is full of women, maturation is outsourced to a complex of electrical lights, electrified trains, and giant reflectors. But what seems to matter most about the theater's geography is its semi-autonomy from both the world of the girls' school and the world of the nearby city. Neither the girls nor their audience have easy, straightforward access to the staging ground where their worlds inter-

sect. And their intersection proceeds in a highly regimented way, with the men reduced to disembodied voices and the girls to voiceless bodies.

The giant reflector suspended from the roof constitutes a central part in a technology that structures modern viewership. Reflectors illuminate the stage while keeping the rows of seats themselves dark. This technology permits the viewer to lose himself (and it is usually "himself") in the events on stage without having to feel implicated in the events witnessed. In dancing in this highly peculiar theater, the girls thus participate not in a transhistorical art but rather in a historically specific kind of theatrical experience. This is not the "Italian-style" theater Wagner derided, in which "one listened from time to time in pauses of the conversation,"<sup>25</sup> nor is it the high-kicking *demimondaine* establishments of Heinrich Heine's Montmartre. This is instead the theater as a high bourgeois institution, a place of worship in late-nineteenth-century *Kunstreligion* enveloped by an impermeable membrane, an enclosure hermetically sealed from the park in which it lies, which is itself hermetically sealed from the outside world.

Within the park's windowless theater, and the scene of viewership it exemplifies—a viewership associated with high art and aesthetic autonomy rather than with popular dance—the conditions of performance are emphatically eroticized and gendered. The purity of the girls, uneducated entirely in the ways of the outside world, is of a piece with their aesthetic purity or absoluteness. Art for art's sake is gendered female, and the men in the audience have to buy tickets for admission. For the audience, the girls are natives of the autonomous sphere of art. They know nothing of the theater's lobby, the ticket booths, or the grand staircase. That outside world, unglimped by and indeed invisible to the girls, is nevertheless sonically present. The musical accompaniment to *The Mosquito Prince* emanates from "the uppermost gallery," and we don't find out who

<sup>22</sup>Wedekind, *Prosa*, 360.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>25</sup>Richard Wagner, "Zukunftsmusik," in *Judaism in Music and Other Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 332.

produces it. All sound within the theater, be it the bustle of the audience or the hired hands producing the music, is imported from the outside.

Wedekind's park-theater plays with opera's constituent units—voice, music, movement—but they clearly come to the theater from different places. The girls' movements on stage are presented as a physical realization of the autonomous sphere of art. But the sounds that drift over to Hidalla and her consorts from the audience belong to a very different world of theatergoing: "All the more clearly we could hear, during the appropriate passages, the howls of approval [*Beifallsgeheul*] to the rafters, and during the entr'acte the chatter [*Schwadronieren*] and hollering and the clinking of glasses." This is spectatorship characterized by distraction rather than contemplation, by commercialism rather than art for art's sake: by obscenity rather than innocence.

When embedding *The Mosquito Prince* in *Mine-haha*, Wedekind may well have been remembering an episode from 1894 (right before he made contact with Strauss) which he recounts in his diaries. During a stay in London, Wedekind toured the music halls of Whitechapel, and, judging from his notes on the performances, paid a disturbing amount of attention to child performers there. The theater he describes in his diary matches the soundscape of the park theater almost exactly (*Geheul*, *Brüllen*, *Pfeifen* are all descriptors Hidalla will echo in *Mine-haha*). Visually, the theater seems to have been quite different, and Wedekind devotes little of his lengthy description to its architecture. What details he provides seem miles removed from pitch-dark seats and giant reflectors. His two companions, Wedekind notes, "don't have the least understanding for the place where we find ourselves. The dancing they find boring, the music is not pretty enough. The children performing are too young for them, the audience too loud, the melodies they can't hear, and the hundred years' worth of atmosphere that surrounds them they can't feel."<sup>26</sup> Perhaps Wedekind recognized the

Wagnerian furor in his irritation with this audience too distracted even for a theater of distraction. He imagines a kind of spectacle that might actually compel aesthetic attention as an opera might, but he places it before the hooting and hollering crowd of a music hall rather than the perfumed crowd at a high-toned premiere.

In the thoroughly gendered and absolutely separated spaces of his theater, Wedekind thus grafts two seemingly contradictory modes of spectacle onto each other. Or rather, he pushes these two supposedly antagonistic forms of spectatorship into moments of congruence. The reflector's light and the darkened seats could evoke Bayreuth, or they could evoke a cheap dance hall like the one Heinrich Mann describes early in *Professor Unrat*. The titular Professor Raat encounters the demimondaine Rosa Fröhlich, and their encounter falls somewhere between pornography and a terrifying religious vision: "Somewhere in the back something gleaming broke through the smoke, a very mobile object, something that threw around arms, shoulders or legs, some kind of piece of brightly lit flesh, under the glare of a bright reflector, and a big dark mouth that it opened wide."<sup>27</sup> Wedekind similarly brings together high art and titillation. Whether their union is an impossibility or a profane illumination is just as unclear as it is in the case of Professor Raat's vision of Rosa Fröhlich.

#### THE DICTATORSHIP OF LEGS: *SALOMÉ*

Strauss's post-Wedekind project, his adaptation of Oscar Wilde's French-language *succès de scandale* *Salomé*, which premiered two years after *Mine-haha* was published, turns on the same disaggregation of media, on the same coincidence of mutually incompatible modes of reception. In Wedekind's theater, silent moving bodies and noisy but invisible spectators meet. Strauss's opera, although presented as a Wagnerian music drama, follows Wedekind in pulling apart the media that such opera usually combines. Strauss's obscenity, in other words,

<sup>26</sup>Frank Wedekind, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Gerhard Hay (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1986), 314.

<sup>27</sup>Heinrich Mann, *Professor Unrat, oder Das Ende eines Tyrannen* (Munich: Langen, 1906), 54.

likewise asks the spectator to see the legs for themselves. It wants the spectator to see the trees rather than the forest.

In *Salomé*, this pulling-apart of media is part and parcel of a profoundly anti-Wagnerian erotics, which was certainly one reason why Cosima Wagner recoiled in horror when Strauss first played the work for her. In Strauss's *Guntram* (1894), the female love interest had fallen silent in the third act, resorting to a pantomime of crying jags and fainting spells to communicate. Strauss, then far more Schopenhauerian, had intended this regression as an index of renunciation of the will: the will for an erotic object, certainly, but also the will to be truly present on stage. Music becomes the alembic by means of which this pious renunciation is accomplished. In both *Feuersnot* (1901) and *Salomé* (1905), by contrast, the eloquence of the sexualized body forces words to capitulate and forces the opera to surrender entirely to the uncanny, even obscene, potentialities of music. Still, when *Feuersnot* ended with the virginal Diemut losing her virtue, Strauss had handed the act over to the orchestra to depict rather than to his singers. This choice was essentially an exercise in self-censorship, allowing one part of the integrated artwork to take over when the other's powers of depiction were compromised. In *Salomé*, those parts break out in open warfare. In *Guntram*, falling silent had been a sign of sexual renunciation. After Wedekind, so to speak, Strauss deployed such silence as a sign of sexuality run amok.

In most early performances, this switch was particularly marked since, as Udo Kultermann (among others) has noted, a ballet dancer usually took over as Salomé for the duration of the dance. When Salomé the singing persuader becomes Salomé the silent dancer, musical drama is haunted by a specter strenuously banished by Wagner, the repressed ballet.<sup>28</sup> The holistic work of art disintegrates once again into singer and ballet, voice and movement facing each other as quasi-independent elements. Salomé's

dance is central rather than supplementary. In a reversal of Wagner's proposed sublimation of dance into drama, Salomé makes happen through dance what she cannot make happen through dramatic action. Moreover, the unity of popular and elite styles supposedly accomplished by the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is decisively shattered. During the first decade of its performance, the staging of the opera was frequently allowed only if the infamous Dance was excised; meanwhile the excised Dance embarked on a solo career in music halls and cabarets without the dramatic framework to rationalize it. Here, then, the two worlds of theatrical dance allegorized in *Mine-haha's* mysterious theater have finally been rent asunder by their internal contradictions.

The opera's plot and its claustrophobic geography depend on two very different kinds of spectatorship. The setting is a courtyard where, until the dance, little happens. All the main action is defined by what remains unseen. There is a feast behind the scenes, the sounds of which waft onto the stage. There is a dungeon below from which John the Baptist (Jochanaan) roars his visions. What is chiefly seen on stage is Salomé, who stands at the intersection of these multiple gazes. Paradoxically, it is her emancipation from these gazes rather than her submission to them that brings about the opera's obscene climax. As Linda and Michael Hutcheon put it, Salomé comes to realize that "to look is to grant power—to the one observed."<sup>29</sup> And it is *sound* that allows her to emancipate herself—sound that, as Lawrence Kramer has put it, "choreograph[s] the eye."<sup>30</sup>

Even before Salomé dons her seven veils and begins to strip them away one by one, *Salomé* is a drama of spectatorship. Everyone at court is staring. The tetrarch Herod lusts after Salomé, the manservant Narraboth gawks at her too, so much in fact that Herod worries that perhaps he's glowering at him. Herodias's page gazes at Narraboth gazing, warning that "you look too

<sup>28</sup>Udo Kultermann, "The 'Dance of the Seven Veils': *Salomé* and Erotic Culture around 1900," *Artibus et Historiae* 27, no. 53 (2006): 187–215, here 196.

<sup>29</sup>Linda Hutcheon, Michael Hutcheon, *Bodily Charm: Living Opera* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 109.

<sup>30</sup>Lawrence Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 187.



much," and from below the imprisoned prophet provides graphic visions of what Herodias has done with various men. Those readings which posit *Salomé* as a drama of competing gazes differ on what sort of object, or indeed subject, that makes the princess herself: does Salomé cannily control and manipulate the gaze (as Linda and Michael Hutcheon have suggested), does being spectated turn her into an equivocal victim of masculinist forms of visual control (as Lawrence Kramer has suggested), or does she break free of operatic regimes of the gaze (as Carolyn Abbate argued)? All of these readings agree that Salomé is presented as the visual object par excellence—and that it weighs on her. When we first gaze upon her, she flees the party and does some gazing of her own, serenading the moon, describing it in much the same terms in which Narraboth has just described her. But her gazing is interrupted. Salomé, available and vulnerable, nexus of all the scopic pleasure on stage, comes face to face with her dramatic opposite: the disembodied voice of John the Baptist, his body hidden in a dungeon below. It is its hiddenness that ignites her desire, and it is a desire as much for his hiddenness as for the man who is hidden.

The rest of the story constitutes a renegotiation of these two positions. Salomé wants to see what she has thus far only heard, wants the body that is unavailable to her. This is at once a movement toward the essence of opera (if, as Lawrence Kramer has suggested, the "detachable" or "wandering voice" is constitutive of the operatic as such<sup>31</sup>) and away from it (inasmuch as it is a quest for the body behind the "grain" of the voice). But in the process of this quest for Jochanaan, the characteristic death drive of the opera heroine pushes her into a position of hypervisibility that dialectically reverts into its opposite. The dance of the seven veils may start as innuendo, but it turns more graphic as it goes along. By the time Salomé is rapturously kissing Jochanaan's severed head, Herod, who previously couldn't get enough of the girl, has seen far too much. The opera's

climactic ballet (or rather ballets, since many stagings render Salomé's serenade of the severed head as a dance of sorts too) push right past showing everything and straight into showing too much. And at the end Salomé is removed from the scene in exactly the same way in which Jochanaan is hidden in the beginning.

As Salomé gazes into Jochanaan's lifeless eyes, Herod's issues a command, "Kill this woman," at which a heap of soldiers bear down on the princess and "bury her under their shields." The stage direction comes directly from Wilde, who instructs that the soldiers "écrasent sous leurs boucliers," that is to say they pretty much erase her. The opera thus ends with a woman who found her own hypervisibility a problem finally being afforded some much-needed invisibility. Obscenity in *Salomé* is concerned with a desire for the sister arts: looking for the voice, calling vocally for a visual object, touching sound. Its death-drive always aims at a self-exhaustion in the other, that is to say the other medium.

Strauss, like Wedekind, turns the idea of obscenity on its head: Salomé's obscenity is a wish to see and a wish to become invisible. Her most famous action, that of unveiling, occurs in the service of an ultimate disappearance behind a veil of shields. It is a moment prompted by the madness everyone can hear in her voice, but it is also a belated response to a command that had issued from Jochanaan's now-dead lips. It is one of the many moments in *fin-de-siècle* opera where opera's scopic element and its sonic drama slide apart. Many of these constitute responses to the Wagnerian total work of art, grappling with its demand at integration by wondering what a failure, or a refusal, to integrate might mean.<sup>32</sup> The same holds true, I would argue, for the final scenes of *Salomé*: they constitute a hypertrophy first of the visual, of pure bodily movement, then later of the sonic as Salomé's serenade to the severed head batters the audience with untrammelled hysteria while the orchestra sets unassimilable chord upon unassimilable chord. The visual

<sup>31</sup>Lawrence Kramer, "Opera as Case History: Freud's Dora, Strauss's *Salomé*, and the Perversity of Modern Life," *Opera Quarterly* 31 (2015): 14.

<sup>32</sup>Adrian Daub, *Tristan's Shadow: Sexuality and the Total Work of Art after Wagner* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

object has become so visible as to flip into pure, hysterical voice.

#### SEEING LEGS

Although both *Mine-haha* and *Salomé* seek obscenity in synesthesia, they stage it as a tribunal of gazes in which crucially the gazed-upon object does some gazing of its own. No sooner is *Salomé* objectified by lustful glances than she in turn objectifies the moon. In Wedekind's theater too, the spectacle (we might even say the work of art) becomes self-conscious, realizes itself as something susceptible to viewing and interpreting. If dancing in opera generally invites the spectator to not see the opera for the legs, as Wagner claims, then what sets *Mine-haha* and *Salomé* apart is that the legs and the gaze upon them comes to ensorcel even the possessors of those legs. The giant reflector that Wedekind suspends over his young dancing girls introduces them to the modern dynamics of becoming someone else's spectacle. The dancers are asked to contemplate being spectated, and spectated, moreover, not so much by a particular person or set of persons as by a subject position, "occupied or not." Prior to their arrival in the theater, the girls were never concerned that while dancing, or "walking on our hands," "our skirts would fly up"—after all, "one couldn't see oneself [in this manner]."<sup>33</sup> The reflector forces them to do precisely that: they learn, by looking, what it is like to be looked at.

Ever since little Wilhelmine in Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* (1799), a girl who "finds inexpressible delight in lying on her back and sticking her little legs into the air, without care for her hemline and the outside world's judgment,"<sup>34</sup> a child's innocent dance has functioned as an allegory for what Friedrich Schiller called "the naïve," while the nostalgic look cast at those dancing legs is the "sentimental" gaze that knows of an innocence and completeness constitutively inaccessible to whoever is capable of gazing upon it, that is to say, of sepa-

rating from it. *Lucinde*'s narrator understands Wilhelmine's behavior as "evidence for her inner completeness."<sup>35</sup> The same "joyous self-contentment" is what Wedekind's girls lose under the glare of the reflector. This loss may even constitute the drama they are "really" enacting. Compare Schlegel's vision to the rather horrifying description Wedekind provides of the main attraction in a London music hall: "A four year-old dancing-girl in a short white princess dress with bare legs, white socks and little shoes of golden Morocco leather. She puts a monocle in her eye, sings the Monte-Carlo-song and on each beat of the tympani shows her undergarments up to her belt."<sup>36</sup> As little as Hidalla and her consorts know what they are miming, this child performer knows what she is singing about when "The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo" claims that he "went to Paris for the charms of mademoiselle."

The draft for *The Mosquito Prince* tells a cheeky, ribald, and ultimately rather confusing tale that is entirely about sex. A sexually predatory prince, a kindly wizard who marries his daughter to him, a set-upon mosquito, and the woman impregnated by his stinger interact in ever-changing configurations. Throughout there is an almost obsessive emphasis on penetration, figured as stinging, which in some cases causes pregnancy (even in the prince), death, or simply pain. This is an obsession which *The Mosquito Prince* shares with *The Fleas*, the other scenario Wedekind sent Strauss, but which Wedekind left out of *Mine-haha*. The way the scenario plays with sex is obvious, but it plays just enough to upend any straightforward allegory. Something changes in this story when it is transported from the page in Strauss's folder labeled *Ballet Wedekind* to the theater of *Mine-haha*. As written for Strauss, the scenario relies on the knowingness of an audience, which might appreciate the way the ballet plays with, one might even say perverts, traditional sexual logic. As performed by Hidalla and her friends, the same story reverses: the fun of it, at least for the unseen audience, derives from the fact that the girls don't really understand what

<sup>33</sup>Wedekind, *Prosa*, 357.

<sup>34</sup>Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde*, in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, Band 5 (Paderborn/Munich: Schöningh, 1962), 16.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>36</sup>Wedekind, *Die Tagebücher*, 315.

they are performing. The scenario's perverse upending of phallic sexuality seems designed to keep the girls in the dark. The abundant non-normative sexuality (male pregnancy, same-sex entanglements, etc.) actually confirms normative heterosexuality, because it reassures the anything-but-innocent audience that the girls are quite ignorant of the things they are forced to enact.

At the same time the scenario seems to nudge the girls toward a realization, and Hidalla acknowledges its enactment as a learning experience. The girls know they are being spectated, and they start perceiving themselves as objects to be spectated—not least when their legs are up against the reflector. When Gustave Flaubert turns to the Salomé story in his *Herodias* (published as part of the *Trois Contes* in 1877), he has Salomé's bewitching dance before the tetrarch culminate in a rather similar gesture: "Like in a flash, she threw herself upon the palms of her hands, while her feet rose straight up into the air. In this bizarre pose she moved about the floor like a gigantic beetle; then stood motionless."<sup>37</sup> The "bizarreness" of the pose seems to be the point: Salomé is no longer presenting her legs as objects for Herod's lustful gaze. Instead she presents presentation as such. Hers is a pose that says "pose," and her crab-like scuttle is no longer sublimated "natural" movement, no longer an innocent, child-like movement with a *souçon* of vampiness—this is a movement that exists only for beholding. Just as for Salomé, for the girls in the park theater legs become a form of discourse. Accordingly, when Hidalla first hears male voices from the audience, they are "criticizing my calves."<sup>38</sup> The girls' muteness is in some sense identical to speaking through legs. Wagner's fear about ballet is turned here into an aesthetic principle. Hidalla claims that she does not remember how any of her fellow students talked, but that "I remember of each of them how she walked."

Legs are what constitutes the ability to say

"I." The girls' self-consciousness is entirely routed through their legs. "We felt ourselves in our legs and feet, more so than in our eyes and fingers."<sup>39</sup> The idea that self-consciousness might be problematic for, or indeed inimical to, correct theatrical spectatorship was a pervasive one around 1900. Wagner had vituperated against a theater of distraction in which stage and gallery were coefficients, where the chatter, the boos, and the coming and going were parts of the drama. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch has noted, theatrical darkness such as that introduced at Bayreuth was intended to create a kind of partnership (*Zweisamkeit*) of spectator and spectacle at the expense of communication among the spectators.<sup>40</sup> What such darkness sought to remove was the audience watching itself watching. For his operas, Wagner had initially envisioned just the kind of amphitheater in which Hidalla and her cohorts perform. He had moved away from the idea precisely because he thought that under conditions of modernity, it would introduce an element of self-consciousness into spectatorship that would destroy the unity of the arts in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The spectacle performed by Hidalla and her consorts is thus always already in the process of moving from unselfconsciousness to self-consciousness. It is tempting to read Wedekind's project of a "physical education" (as opposed to an intellectual one) as concerned with keeping "the female mind innocent . . . while honing the female body to perfection."<sup>41</sup> But if the text of *Mine-haha* stages the spectacle of innocence, the ballet draft of *The Mosquito Prince* is always at risk of destroying that innocence by exposing it as spectacle. In this respect we have to take the fundamental contradictoriness of Wedekind's text quite seriously. At one level, Hidalla and her friends have no idea what it is they're performing. They're the perfect self-sufficient spectacle—at least for a moment. For

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>40</sup>Schivelbusch, *Lichtblicke: Zur Geschichte der Helligkeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Hanser, 1983), 195.

<sup>41</sup>Stephanie Libbon, "Frank Wedekind's Prostitutes: A Liberating Re-Creation or a Male Recreation?" in *Commodities of Desire: The Prostitute in German Literature*, ed. Christiane Schönfeld (Rochester: Camden House, 2000), 46–61, here 50.

<sup>37</sup>Gustave Flaubert, *The Complete Works of Gustave Flaubert: Salommbó* edn. vol. 2, *Herodias: A Simple Soul* (New York: M. Walther Dunne, 1904), 48.

<sup>38</sup>Wedekind, *Prosa: Erzählungen, Aufsätze, Selbstzeugnisse, Briefe*, 122.

that brief moment the complex interplay of arts and technology produces a rare amalgam like the one envisioned by Wagner. A rapt audience can lose itself in a spectacle that is entirely unconscious of the fact that it's spectacle. No opera singers thinking of their next paycheck or sweating under scratchy wigs, as in Mann's story "Blood of the Walsungs" (*Wälsungenblut*)—these performers are one with their performance.

But that oneness is always fugitive. The girls are aware of being watched and they are also watching themselves. Hidalla is told "just precisely to imitate what the other girls playing peasants were doing." There is no rehearsing in this theater, but for the same reason the girls turn each other into spectacle. We can assume that the lack of preparation is supposed to vouch for naïve immediacy, a kind of spontaneity. Ironically, however, this immediacy is lost because the girls are learning on stage. We could even say that the spectacle staged in the theater is that of *Erziehung*. The spectacle is not the result of the education they receive in the park: it *is* that education.

Whatever the aesthetic value the audience and performers attach to the ballet, where does that value come from? Clearly not just from the fact that the girls perform things they don't understand, but which their audience does understand. Nor is the point that spectators and spectated share in some unspoken, winking collusion—a "conspiracy of meaning," as Peter Bailey described music-hall culture.<sup>42</sup> Above all, as we have seen, the park theater stages a transition from unselfconsciousness to knowingness, and it is this transition that the spectators come to see. Strauss's operas of the same period find themselves perched on the same tipping point. In *Salomé*, hypervisibility and hyper-awareness become the means of self-annihilation, a way of making oneself visually unavailable. In *Elektra*, subsequently, the title character's insistence on communicating lapses into a spectacle of noncommunication: a noncommunication through dance.

<sup>42</sup>Peter Bailey, "Conspiracies of Meaning: Music-Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture," *Past and Present* 144 (1994): 138–70.

THE "NAMELESS DANCE":  
ELEKTRA, SALOMÉ, AND  
OBSCENE SPECTATORSHIP

ADRIAN  
DAUB  
Spectacle  
of Dance

Strauss's collaboration with Hugo von Hofmannsthal, which was to produce five operas over twenty-five years, began with a fascination with dance and culminated in a work in which dance is both enframed by the operatic totality and subversive of it. Although their first collaboration, *Elektra* (1909), came long after Strauss's artistic dalliance with Wedekind at the turn of the century, Hofmannsthal and Strauss first made contact during the same period. The first work Hofmannsthal wrote for Strauss was another ballet that would go unproduced: *The Triumph of Time* (*Triumph der Zeit*).

In March 1900, Hofmannsthal wrote to his parents that he was about to embark on a ballet "intended for Richard Strauss."<sup>43</sup> By the fall he sent a précis to Strauss, but the composer passed almost immediately. In a polite letter dated 14 December, Strauss explains that, after expressing his desire for a workable ballet scenario to Hofmannsthal in the spring, he had embarked on "patching together"<sup>44</sup> his own scenario over the summer. In the event, Strauss's own ballet (*Kythere*, based on Watteau's painting "Voyage à Cythère"<sup>45</sup>) did not come to fruition, either, although some of the musical sketches made their way into *Feuersnot*.<sup>46</sup> It would take another fourteen years before a Strauss ballet, "Josephslegende" (op. 63), written by Hofmannsthal and Harry Graf Kessler, would actually premiere.

It's not hard to imagine why Strauss balked at Hofmannsthal's overture, and why his tactful reference to his own ballet projects may have been a smokescreen. *The Triumph of Time* is such a wordy scenario that Strauss must have asked himself what role, if any, his music would have to play in it. The scenario includes

<sup>43</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, letter to his parents, 17 March 1900, Deutsches Literatur Archiv Marbach, II, 19.

<sup>44</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Briefwechsel* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1965), 16.

<sup>45</sup>See Heisler, *The Ballet Collaborations of Richard Strauss*, 14.

<sup>46</sup>Bryan Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 76.

a staggering wealth of allegory that would have required the listener to consult the playbill repeatedly (it is confusing even on the page). The dance numbers and musical interludes feel wedged-in and are almost entirely motivated by the stage action. And Hofmannsthal's draft relies heavily on dialogue that most likely was meant to be conveyed by intertitles (which had come into use in motion pictures only that year). All of the apparatus would probably have convinced Strauss that the music would be, in Wagner's phrase, "danced off the stage" by her sister arts.

But what if the written word could be danced off the stage in an analogous fashion? The collaboration of Strauss and Hofmannsthal took a decisive step in 1903, when Strauss attended the Berlin premiere of Hofmannsthal's play *Elektra* and decided it would make a "brilliant opera text," at least "after I had re-written the scene with Orestes."<sup>47</sup> In particular Strauss recognized the anti-linguistic thrust of Hofmannsthal's "Letter of Lord Chandos" (1902): as Elektra's desire for revenge finally finds fulfillment, language is pushed beyond its limits. Something else—dance, music—has to take over to express Elektra's psychology. Language, in respect both to its power and to its failure to describe or affect the world, and above all to specify psychological states, remained foremost among Hofmannsthal's concerns. Thus his fictional Lord Chandos complains how "the abstract words, of which our tongue is forced to avail itself, in order to put out any sort of judgment, crumbled in my mouth like rotten mushrooms."<sup>48</sup>

In the second half of 1906, just as Strauss was reporting his first progress on *Elektra*, Hofmannsthal received a letter from his friend Harry, Count Kessler, a patron of the arts and theatrical pioneer. Kessler had made the acquaintance of Ruth St. Denis, an American dancer who he thought "makes real what [Isadora] Duncan only promises."<sup>49</sup> Together

with Max Reinhardt he wanted to stage a new *Salomé* with St. Denis in the title role, but St. Denis wanted certain changes made to Wilde's text, and Kessler decided that Hofmannsthal should be the one to make them. The problem, once again, was the role of dance in a dramatic work, though in this case a play rather than an opera. For, as St. Denis pointed out to Kessler, the problem with *Salomé* was that "it was purely literary."<sup>50</sup>

St. Denis's misgivings about "the poem, the poetic frame" of *Salomé* turned on the vaunted dance, which she claimed was "dramatically speaking without effect." The "peculiar disassembly [*Zerlegung*] of the drama into its two constituent elements"<sup>51</sup> was "so to speak contrary to the material." St. Denis wanted a new version of *Salomé* in which the dance "would not just accidentally bring about the catastrophe," but would rather constitute the "climax of the action."<sup>52</sup> Kessler and St. Denis sketched the outlines of the scene as they envisioned it, and Kessler relayed the details to his friend.

Their main intervention closely mirrored Wedekind's reworking of "The Mosquito Prince" and "The Fleas." They too brought together dance and the drama of its spectatorship. They proposed arranging the courtiers around a circular table, at the center of which Salomé performs her dance. Herod and Herodias were to sit on the extremes, and slowly diminishing lights were to gradually reduce the focus on Salomé's body in favor of their two faces.

Salomé's dance is now the main event. She dances one after the other a series of dances, each of which drives Herod more manic, until, completely unhinged, he makes his promise [to deliver the head of John the Baptist]. During the dance the lights go out one by one, the table eventually goes entirely dark until only the *faces* of the guests shine forth from the darkness, eventually only the clenched faces of Herod and Herodias, who sit across the round from one another in the brightest spots. Herod's promise issues forth from this uncanny darkness.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Cited in Walter Panofsky, *Richard Strauss: Partitur eines Lebens* (Deutsche Buch-Gemeinschaft, 1965), 138.

<sup>48</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Ein Brief," *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben: Prosa II*, ed. Herbert Steiner (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1976), 7–20.

<sup>49</sup>26 October 1906; Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Briefwechsel*, 130.

<sup>50</sup>Harry Graf Kessler, *Das Tagebuch 1880–1937* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 2004–10), 4: 209.

<sup>51</sup>Hofmannsthal, *Briefwechsel*, 136.

<sup>52</sup>Kessler, *Tagebuch*, 4: 211, 4: 209.

<sup>53</sup>Hofmannsthal, *Briefwechsel*, 135.

In this proposed staging, the making and the extraction of the promise are divested of their linguistic trappings. If successful, Denis's and Kessler's version of *Salomé* would require no listening of its audience: a look at the persuasiveness of Salomé's dance and a look at Herod's and Herodias's transfixed gazes would be sufficient to tell all. In the few paragraphs he sketched for Kessler's and St. Denis's proposal, Hofmannsthal describes "an examination of each limb, a vain savoring of the inner harmony of limbs. Everything at service, every kingdom and object of nature exhausts itself in this being-at-service," all of it culminating in a "sense of gesture as the highest form of existence."<sup>54</sup> A lot of words to get beyond words. And perhaps that is why the plan never went beyond the draft stage: what need was there for Hofmannsthal to put into words what neither could nor needed be put into words?

Hofmannsthal thus struggles with the same irony as Wedekind did in his ballet drafts for Strauss: they both celebrate the wordless immediacy of gesture, but can direct such gesture only at the price of great wordiness. They seek to unlock the spontaneous vitality of the body, but require the drill of the text to create it. Hofmannsthal would later meet Ruth St. Denis and describe her as an "odd creature, with so much brain combined with such genius of the body."<sup>55</sup> This genius of the body was something both writers recognized but found difficult to realize in their own "abstract," disembodied medium. Wedekind embraced this irony by staging his ballet in writing, by embedding it in a purely imaginary stage action that insures that gesture is anything but immediate. Hofmannsthal embraces the same irony by creating a libretto in which the main character seeks to effect things with gesture rather than words, but fails spectacularly to do so.

Like *Salomé's* dance, like Diemut's leap in *Feuersnot*, like the silence of Freihild in *Guntram*, *Elektra's* closing scene makes a spectacle of nonverbal communication. We watch a

female voice fail, but in the wake of its failure a nonvocal element argues far more persuasively. Throughout the opera, *Elektra* has presented a hysterical spectacle of grief and revenge. Her mere presence poses a visual problem to the functioning of the court. "I was a black corpse among the living," she exclaims as Orestes finally fulfills her revenge-fantasies, "and this hour I am the fire of life and my flame burns the darkness of the world." Throughout the opera, *Elektra* solicits discourse with her presence, but by the end she is exhorting her listeners to be silent and dance with her ("hier schließt Euch an"). She is no longer a spectacle to be observed, but instead solicits participation—a participation that implies a kind of knowledge.

Hofmannsthal's text is equally alive to *Elektra's* desire to inspire as to her utter failure to do so. While her self-description may recall Kessler's *Salomé* drafts, the stage directions give the lie to her sense of what is happening. Her imagery electrifies, but the current remains ungrounded. "My face has to be whiter than the white-glowing face of the moon," *Elektra* exclaims. She is desperate to signal something, she wishes to be a symbol, an icon to be read—but her audience (including us) can read in her only the desperation to signify, not signification itself. "If someone looks upon me, he must receive death or must perish from lust. Do you not see my face?" Strauss and Hofmannsthal imbue *Elektra* with the ambition that animated Hofmannsthal's sketch for Salomé's dance: "gesture as the highest form of existence,"<sup>56</sup> as a kind of communication that travels directly from body to body, like laughter in a crowd. But no amount of invocation on the part of *Elektra* can call forth this kind of communication. The more she talks, the less she communicates. The more she presumes to build on a knowing connection to her audience, the more that connection deserts her.

Her dance might be counted on to clarify or overcome this dilemma. But as Bryan Gilliam points out, the score doesn't specify *what kind*

<sup>54</sup>Hofmannsthal, *Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2006), XXVII, 148.

<sup>55</sup>Letter to Helene von Nostitz, 12 December 1906; Hofmannsthal, *Briefwechsel*, II, 29.

<sup>56</sup>Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben*, 148.

of dance Elektra performs (referring to it as a “nameless dance”), and as a result it is not clear what it would mean to join such a dance.<sup>57</sup> More importantly, Hofmannsthal’s text specifies that the other characters on stage are deaf to Elektra’s exhortations, and more importantly insensate to her visual example. Unlike Salomé’s dance, which is a paragon of semiotic felicity (Salomé has made clear what she wants and she has calculated correctly how to dance her way to it), Elektra’s dance is a powerful, but ultimately unclear, sign. There is eloquence in it but no persuasiveness, a mismatch of means and ends. This, too, is obscenity: features that are just meaninglessly “out there,” exposed without any hope of being interpretively recuperated. A bare breast not because someone intended to signify motherhood, fertility, or naturalness, but because someone wanted to see a breast.

Just as in Wedekind’s park, obscenity in *Elektra* does not issue from a winking collusion between audience and performer, but rather from an imbalance between the two. The insistent exhortation that so obviously fails to move its audience, the symptom that cannot be transmitted and is thereby marked as hysterical—these are obscene without being sexy. The obscenity of *Elektra* in some sense clarifies that of *Salomé*. It is easy to suppose that *Salomé* is obscene because Salomé uses her naked body to make something happen. But reading the opera in light of Strauss’s engagement with Wagnerian operatic practice suggests instead that obscenity lies in the opposite, the fact that she uses her naked body to become invisible. *Elektra* functions the same way: Elektra’s discourse and her dance are obscene in so far as they are meaninglessly, irrecuperably out there. As with the unburied body of Polyneices, no meaning, be it ever so tawdry, manages to lay hold of Elektra’s outpourings and render them safe. The ob-scene of the total work of art is the self-sufficiency of the sign.

Wedekind’s integration of *The Mosquito Prince* into his novel has the somewhat unusual effect of removing rather than adding a second level of signification. Any dancers that Wedekind and Strauss could have called on to perform the scenario would have understood what they were performing, but they would also have understood that their performance could not acknowledge that fact. As performed in the park theater, by contrast, *The Mosquito Prince* brims with references that the girls cannot yet understand. What in the draft sent to Strauss was just a bawdy joke turns out to have a far more interesting epistemology once inserted into *Mine-haha*. For the fictional play, anticipating Strauss’s *Rosenkavalier*, lives off its trouser roles. Its celebration of heterosexuality becomes the motor for constant onstage homoeroticism. Here, just as in *Salomé*, the objects of the spectacle turn out to know more than the gaze gives them credit for. For the only sexuality the girls are ignorant of turns out to be heterosexuality.

There is more to Wedekind’s insistence on the girls’ legs than a parallel to the dialectic of sentimental and naïve. The outstretched legs come to arouse Hidalla’s interest as well as that of the audience. The male gaze from the barred boxes in the gallery begins to educate the girls in the nature of sexual difference. Only through the performance are the girls made familiar with the matter, albeit in a strange and circuitous way. They recognize the voices from the gallery as male, and they notice that applause tends to greet each instance of objectification of or violence against female characters in the ballet. The girls “perform” sex, but don’t know what it is.<sup>58</sup> The unseen men in the audience, on the other hand, “speak” sexual difference even while that difference itself is as yet invisible to the girls: “You’re missing the best part [*Dir fehlt das Beste*],” they whisper to a cross-dressed Hidalla.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup>Bryan Gilliam, *Rounding Wagner’s Mountain: Richard Strauss and Modern German Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 103.

<sup>58</sup>Wedekind, *Prosa*, 124.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 126.

This points to the girls' encounter of sexual difference among themselves, although only in virtual form. The girls' androgyny is not total, but instead seems to rely on a kind of double bookkeeping. The trouser roles deflect male desire; the audience seems to derive little titillation from them. On the other hand, the girls who perform their own gender seem to regard their trouser-wearing cohorts as in some way transformed. "Franziska, who played the prince, had become a thing of wonder to me," the narrator explains. Something of the character of the prince seems, at least in the narrator's eyes, to rub off on the girl playing him.

If the theater introduces difference into the self-sufficient contentment of the park, it introduces it above all through sexual difference. The girls' prelapsarian androgyny, which serves to ally them with the self-sufficient work of art (again not unlike Schlegel's Wilhelmine), seems to generate difference out of itself, in particular once placed under an outside gaze. Masculinity enters into the park's hermetically sealed world of femininity only as part and parcel of an androgyne, but all androgyny necessarily seems to devolve toward two discrete and complementary sexes. The result is a parody of Aristophanes' model of originally androgynous sexuality in Plato's *Symposium*, something that becomes most evident in the narrator's first encounter with an androgyne. The androgyne in question is a horse, which the protagonist, in an unwitting recapitulation of Aristophanes' narrative, divides into "two separate beings" measured by front and hind legs: "The sight confused me. How did these hind parts come together with the front parts? Those were two different creatures, which didn't fit at all. Or perhaps they did after all. The hind parts seemed to me uglier than the front. The front attracted me more, on account of its elegance; the narrow onset of the legs; none of us had that. . . . Suddenly I recognized in the front part the boys with whom I learned to jump and walk under Gertrud's tutelage." It is the legs that first trigger the intuition of difference: "None of us had that [*das hatte keine von uns*]." <sup>60</sup> In this circumstance, the girl's gaze coincides neatly with

(and in fact anticipates) that of the male spectators in the mysterious theater. The theater's stark dichotomization of (invisible) voice and (mute) motion thus has a direct cognate in Hidalla's perception of her peers. But, given this first intuition, why is the theater necessary at all?

*The Mosquito Prince*, for all its sweaty innuendo, seems little disposed to usher its cast into safe heterosexuality. The scenario seems to offer a celebration of phallic sexuality, into which it forms a virtual induction when Wedekind integrates it into *Mine-haha*. Although the play is riddled with acts of penetration, the only ones that produce "pregnancy" are those by the mosquito: the male-gendered mosquito penetrates and impregnates the prince in a deliberately violent act of vengeance. At the same time, however, both prince and mosquito are played by girls. The performance thus highlights the wholesale contingency of (hetero-)sexuality in Wedekind's erotic geography. Heterosexuality in Wedekind's park is a solution only to a problem that it has caused in the first place. The introduction of men seems to be an unnecessary supplement. Hidalla learns about sexual difference without them, through legs rather than through voices. This dynamic extends to the aesthetic dimensions of the theater. Why does the idyllically self-sufficient world of the park need to put itself on display for an outside? If the girls' final walk out of the theater, their leaving the park's unisex environment for heterosexuality and leaving the static sphere of the naïve for the sentimental, posits the fourth wall as a kind of hymen, then the question of why this walk is necessary at all is central to the book's metaphysics of sex and its metaphysics of art.

Throughout the narrative, the park's unisex environment is artificially cleared of eroticism; the girls behave in ways that only the reader understands as erotic. This creates a need to leave the park for erotic maturation, first in the theater, then in the city. Nevertheless, there exists in the park a "third sex": a species of old women, disfigured and ugly, who lurk in the shadows of the dormitories and in the changing rooms of the theater, performing menial tasks such as stoking fires and washing the girls' feet before their dances. In a narrative that mostly

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 109.



proceeds with the nonchalance of a dream, in which the most extraordinary thing requires no more words than the most quotidian, the narrator is oddly compulsive in dwelling on these women's extreme physical deformity each time one wanders onto the scene.

Who these women are and why they cohabit with the girls in the park becomes clear only gradually. Throughout the story, Hidalla feels attraction to other girls. One of the older girls tells her off, explaining that the old crones' deformity is bound up with same-sex desire: "She went to another girl, when she went here as a child. That is why she is still here." Here, then, we have a girl who indeed did not take the walk across the theater stage, down the secret door, and into the theater lobby—and whose retarded development registers all too clearly in her features, posture, and demeanor. It is never explained whether it is the nature of these acts that leads to the deformity, or if it is the nature of the punishment. For punished they are: "If they were to find me with you," the older girl explains, "I'd have to work all my life and couldn't leave the park for all my life," which is the reason, she adds, "why they are so ugly."<sup>61</sup>

Not surprisingly, perhaps, since the old women are living warning signs against same-sex attraction, their abject ugliness seems to shock anew on each encounter. "They afforded the most horrific sight," the narrator explains: "Faces like the bark of an oak tree from which all branches had been stripped." Hidalla insists that "one couldn't really regard them as human," calls them "monsters" and "specimens," and comments on their "desolate, contemptible slave-existence." But they are more than warnings. Their degenerate physiognomy also serves to parody the very female bodies whose attractiveness seems to make the warning necessary in the first place: "The very thought [of seeing them naked] tightened my throat and threatened to envelop me with disgust."<sup>62</sup>

There is something odd as well as cruel about this mechanism. It is precisely the ugly women guilty of same-sex transgression who direct the

narrator's attraction to the other girls. Hidalla's disgust at the thought of seeing the old women naked immediately brings to her mind those bodies that are not so misshapen. Their ugliness only highlights to Hidalla the forbidden beauty of her classmates. Like the giant reflector in the park's theater, it forces her to reckon with the girls' beauty self-consciously. Saint Augustine famously suggested that the word *monster* comes from *monstrare*, to show. Monstrosity is communicative. By enhancing the desirability of Hidalla's classmates, the old women in their abjection tell the story of a possible transgression in terms that aesthetically vindicate the transgression.

The transgression asserts itself by staying where one is. Crossing lines (out of the park, into the foyer, into heterosexuality) means going with the flow. Where, then, does obscenity reside in the world of *Mine-haha*? The sexual dimension of the play is hardly obscene. It is a little louche, maybe, but the spectacle of sexual initiation, of innocence and knowingness, is an amusement, not a scandal. *The Mosquito Prince*, however, has its own ob-scene, inscribed yet disavowed. That scene has its location in the park, and it is nothing other than the possibility of same-sex attraction, the possibility of not needing a (male) gaze to authorize one's subjectivity, the possibility of remaining in the park. On the one hand *Mine-haha* stages the repressed, the disavowed, the obscene of the Wagnerian artwork. But through its depiction of same-sex attraction it depicts that artwork *itself* as obscene.

For Wedekind that would surely not be a criticism. His path "beyond" Wagner comes by way of the recognition and valorization of what is obscene *in* Wagner: not an obscenity of transgression, but one of immanence. And here Wedekind's abortive collaborator comes once more into view. For although *Salomé* and *Elektra* tell very different kinds of stories, both point to obscenity as the unspoken engine of the total work of art. Obscenity arises when each of opera's media pushes to reunite with her sister arts, in a push so total, so all-consuming, that it becomes the aesthetic equivalent of the death drive. Wedekind and Strauss, like the denizens of *Mine-haha*'s park, decide to stay on the reservation for a little while

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 345, 107.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 107.

longer—their obscenity is one of languid self-sufficiency. Let others strike out in a more radical fashion—abandon tonality fully, abandon theatrical naturalism. Theirs is an obscenity of lingering: transgression through immanence.



### **Abstract.**

This article examines the musical, literary, and theatrical practice of a group of early German modernists—above all Richard Strauss and Frank Wedekind. All of them turn to dance, its unmediated physicality, and its erotic charge to articulate a response to Richard Wagner’s theatrical project, specifically the concept of the total work of art. Although Wagner had included a few ballet numbers in his mature operas, he treated the form (and the number as such) as a threat to a specifically operatic plenitude of sensuous meaning—dance, he feared, threatened to dance music and drama right off the stage. I argue that this allowed certain post-Wagnerians to interrogate Wagner’s aesthetic through the category of ob-

scenity—the dancer who, by dint of her brute physicality, could disturb and misalign theatrical spectacle became an important figure in their art. After a planned collaboration on a number of ballets came to naught, Strauss and Wedekind each turned to their native media to stage and interrogate balletic forms: Strauss through the medium-scrambling Dance of the Seven Veils in *Salomé*, Wedekind by inserting his ballet drafts into a strange novella, *Minehaha, Or on the Bodily Education of Young Girls*. Strauss’s collaboration with Hugo von Hofmannsthal, which was to prove far more consequential and productive than the one with Wedekind, likewise began with an abortive ballet draft, and again came to reflect on dance’s role in other media (opera and theater, in this case). Their reflections on the role of dance in operatic and theatrical spectacle find their expression in *Elektra*’s final dance, which turns on its head the mysterious persuasiveness that Wagner had feared in dance and that Wedekind and Strauss had used to such effect in *Salomé*: a dance so expressive no one is moved by it. Keywords: Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss, Frank Wedekind, obscene, *Salomé*, *Elektra*

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### IN OUR NEXT ISSUE (SUMMER 2016)

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Articles by Richard Leppert, Robynn Stilwell,  
Elizabeth Morgan, and Daneen Wardrop